

Istook: “Public Broadcasting and Big Bird can fly on Their Own”

Istook takes to House floor to battle over CPB funding

Washington, DC – Congressman Ernest Istook (R-OK) spoke on the floor of the House of Representatives today regarding reducing federal funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). His comments are as follows:

“Mr. Speaker, I rise to oppose the amendment. We should recognize two things:

1—Big Bird has grown up; he and his friends can fly on their own, and

2—Americans have access to a multitude of educational, cultural, and children’s programming, being provided by the vast variety of diverse networks that we have today.

“Public broadcasting has developed a major base of private donors, corporate donors, and licensing fees and royalties from programs. Because of this, federal funding is only 15%--one dollar in seven—of the budget for public broadcasting. This bill only reduces a fraction of that 15%--about a 4% overall reduction for public broadcasting’s funding. And they have ample resources already on hand to make up the difference.

“Public broadcasters have accumulated major financial resources, hundreds of millions of dollars that they have now invested in stocks, bonds, and other securities, in addition to owning their broadcast facilities.

“In other words, Big Bird and his friends have grown up; they can fly on their own.

“But there’s another factor. Public broadcasting is not the only place to find educational, cultural, historical documentaries and children’s programs. We have achieved variety and diversity thanks to networks that don’t ask for federal dollars. C-SPAN carries the proceedings of Congress to the world—without asking for a federal subsidy. We have the Discovery Channel, the History Channel, Nickleodeon for kids, the Arts & Entertainment Network, Lifetime Television, the Family Channel, the Food Network, the Science Channel, and so forth.

“Nor do we need a nationwide subsidy to reach a few targeted households. I heard someone say that we need public broadcasting to provide TV for the poor. Let’s understand that what we call poverty in the USA is not like poverty in Bangladesh, the Sudan, in Haiti, or anyplace else on the planet. In the United States, not only does almost every “poor” household have a television, but two-thirds of them have cable television, with full access to this vast network of diverse programming.

“It is getting harder and harder to distinguish public broadcasting from the rest of America’s broadcasting. This is because other broadcasters—a great many of them—now carry the same type of programs that was once the hallmark of public broadcasting. And it’s also because public broadcasting every year looks more and more like other networks. Public radio has been moving away from classical music and more toward the talk radio that is common to the profit sector. Much of public TV is filled with some of the same old movies and old TV shows that we see on other networks, even as those other networks add documentaries and special programs that once were the hallmark of public TV.

“Mr. Speaker, we have higher priorities than subsidizing one segment of America’s broadcasters—a segment that is not as unique as it once was. Chairman Regula has made tough decisions among those priorities, and we should support him in those decisions.”

The current reduction in federal funding of public broadcasting will only amount to a four percent cut in their annual budget. At the time of this release, the CPB is scheduled to receive \$300 million federal dollars. This money is not earmarked necessarily for programming, such as Sesame Street or Blues Clues, but is allocated for their total annual budget.